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ABSTRACT

This case study of an historian high school history teacher is an account of how differing views of the nature of history and historical knowledge influenced the teacher's teaching practice. The two discourse communities the teacher belonged to, that of the university where the degree was granted and that of the school community in which the teaching took place had distinct but interconnected and overlapping potential tensions for the teacher. The paper attempts to analyze the nature of the tensions resulting from the two groups and to explain how the teacher resolved them. The tensions are then tied to contemporary issues of reform in history education, the application of the new national history standards, and the preparation and professional development of history teachers. (EH)

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Historian as High School History Teacher: A Case Study

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Historian as High School History Teacher: A Case Study

Introduction

This case study of Dr. Martha Reese[1]—an historian high school history teacher—is an account of how differing views of the nature of history and historical knowledge influenced her teaching practice. Largely epistemological in nature, these differing views have their roots in two discourse communities to which this historian teacher belonged—the school history community in which she taught, and its disciplinary counterpart at the university where she received her doctorate. The views of history held by these two communities produced a set of somewhat distinct but interconnected and overlapping potential tensions for Reese.[2] For example, the potential tensions included the relationship between historical fact and interpretation, school curricular design and recent historiographical scholarship, and school assessment practices and current disciplinary perspectives on historical knowledge.

My purpose is to try to unpack the nature of these tensions and how Reese appeared to resolve them. Then I wish to relate them briefly to some of the issues they subsequently raise, namely reform in history education, the application of new national history standards, and the preparation and professional development of history teachers. But first, some background that contrasts the differences of the school and disciplinary communities and sets the stage for understanding the tensions and their results.

Historians, Recent Historiography, and Teaching School History

History as Archivism

Over the last 20 years, significant shifts have occurred in the epistemological moorings of many academic disciplines. The discipline of history has not escaped untouched, to the contrary (see Seixas, 1993, 1994). By a number of accounts (Kammen, 1989; LaCapra, 1985; Novick, 1988;

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[1] This is a pseudonym.

[2] Although I use the term "tensions" to describe part of Reese's experience, it was not clear that she thought about them as tensions. Rather, she seemed to have worked out a balance between competing views. I refer to this later as a "resolution" she had attained.

White, 1987), the once lively pursuit of detachment and scientific objectivity in the field of history has all but withered. Some scholars (see Greene, 1994, p.92; Kammen, 1989, pp. 22-23) refer to this older, but popular objectivist-oriented strain in the discipline as the "tradition of archivism." The epistemology supporting this tradition holds that rigorous applications of the scientific method can produce an objective, fact-based history, reliably accurate for centuries to come. This position decenters the historian, her frame of reference, and the judgments she must make about the nature of evidence. By contrast, it places emphasis on the accumulation of evidence in service of drawing conclusions and making generalizations.

The "New History"

The "new history"—historiographical scholarship over the last two decades—recenters the historian, arguing that her frames of reference and commitments are in the very middle of an endless series of decisions she must make about what is historically significant and what is not. The historian's frame of reference appears as large as the evidence itself in determining what ends up being constructed as history. As Kammen (1989) explains, "...practitioners today tend to be ever more explicit, even autobiographical, in explaining where they stand in relation to their subject" (p. 23).

Reese was apprenticed into the discourse community of this new history. She said, "I was most affected in graduate school by learning about the revisionist historians from the sixties onward, not so much for their political views, but their perspective on history—from the bottom up. The point has to be made that history...is in the eyes of the viewer and that's an important point to think about; rather than, 'This happened, period,'...it's more tenuous [than that]." In many ways the current history standards reflect a similar position. For example, in one section on historical thinking, the National Standards for World History (National Center for History in the Schools, 1994) suggest that students are to: "[Read historical] narratives thoughtfully...[to] analyze [authors'] assumptions," to "...consider the significance of what the author included as well as chose to omit...," and to "examine the interpretive nature of history..." (p.17).

School History

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Despite shifts in epistemologies, schools often are slow to absorb the changes in disciplinary communities from which their subject-matter referents are drawn. Wineburg (1991) has referred to this as the breach between school and academy. Kammen (1989) has made a similar observation about history textbooks. He states, "There remains a considerable time lag between the development of important new emphases or interpretations and their assimilations into textbooks" (p.27). School history curricula and assessment practices typically have emphasized the acquisition and recall of historical "facts" (e.g., Goodlad, 1984), reflecting the tradition of archivism. The school district in which Reese taught was no exception.

Method

I was introduced to Reese by the school district secondary social studies supervisor whom I had contacted in search of possible candidates to participate in a collection of comparative case studies I was compiling. I was especially interested in Reese's case for the light it might cast on how an historian might actually teach school history given the recent changes in disciplinary historical scholarship. Reese also was keenly interested in the study and we agreed to begin in the fall of 1993.

During the data-gathering phase of the research, Reese taught three survey American history courses to ninth graders and two AP American history courses to upperclassmen in a large, ethnically diverse, urban high school located on the east coast. Primary data collection took place in one of her ninth-grade history classes. It centered around an 8-week unit on the American Revolution and Federal Period. At various intervals, Reese was interviewed both formally and informally. The formal interviews followed a lengthy protocol that asked her to discuss her philosophical, educational, and teaching background; beliefs about the nature of history as a discipline; current controversies in the field; method of representing history to students; views of learners; and ideas about assessments. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis. Reese's ninth-grade class was observed everyday for the duration of the unit. Lessons and activities were audiotaped and transcribed. Fieldnotes were compiled and texts and documents were obtained for analysis.

Qualitative data analysis can take a number of forms. My preference here involved an inductive, constant-comparative method (Bogdan & Biklin, 1982; Patton, 1990) wherein the various

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forms of data collected are systematically searched for themes and counterthemes that can be assessed by triangulating data sources. During the analysis of this case study data, the tension-resolution I describe here emerged as a significant theme.

Context of the Study

The Historian High School Teacher

In the spring preceding the study, Reese had received her doctorate in history from a large east coast university. She specialized in American history, particularly cultural history and educational reform during the Progressive Era. She had been teaching high school American history for 16 years and defined a major portion of her identity as a high school history teacher.

Reese's knowledge of American history was both broad and deep. She had read widely and was a continuing scholar-consumer of the historical literature. During her doctoral study, she had been immersed in recent disciplinary controversies and debates over methods of doing history and how historical knowledge is constituted. As a result, she said that she came to view history from the bottom up, that the role of previously marginalized historical actors—women, minorities, working-class people, "ordinary" citizens—came to take on much greater importance in her sense of history, so much so that it became a focus in her dissertation. She said, "I see history now as including regular people, workers—history of the life of slaves and not just how slave masters used slaves." She also recognized the centrality of interpretation to the historian and history and elusiveness of reliable historical facts and evidence to the writing of history. She put it this way:

> I'm probably more sensitive to the fact that history is so interpretive and I guess I probably emphasize that more than other teachers might.
>
> ...when I was doing my dissertation, I kept saying to my advisor that I felt as if my conclusions were based on such a tiny bit of evidence. He told me that I had more evidence than many people did for their conclusions. This was surprising because it would seem we are filling in holes.

The School's History Curriculum

The school district's ninth-grade history objectives, although clear and concise, were rooted in the older framework of history as fact archive. There was little in them that reflected the new history's emphasis on the constructivist nature of the historian's role, the scarcity of historical absolutes and

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universals, and history approached from the bottom up. The language of the objectives (see the Appendix) conveyed a sense that the student's task in learning American history was essentially to reproduce the historical record represented by authoritative accounts, notably the textbook and the teacher. None of the objectives asked students to analyze historians' assumptions, to assess strength of evidence they presented, or to otherwise evaluate these ostensibly authoritative sources. The textbook in use was Boorstein and Kelly's (1992), *A History of the United States*, thought to be respectable by many, but nevertheless a rather singular narrative interpretation. As a history teacher in this district, the message was to teach history as a fact archive and employ the assessment practices designed to reinforce it.

Resolving Potential Tensions

The Fact-Interpretation Distinction

Reese's stress on history as largely an interpretive act, her focus on it from the bottom up, and her immersion in the different view of knowledge brought about by the new history threatened to put her in a conflict with the school district's history curriculum and the objectives that underwrote it. On the one hand, Reese seemed to be aware of the potential for conflict, but on the other hand, she worked hard to resolve it for herself. Attempts at resolution were most apparent in interviews, particularly when I asked her about it specifically. For pedagogical purposes, Reese placed historical facts, or as she preferred, "historical information" in one sort of intellectual arena and then put the act of interpretation in another.[3] Students, for example, were to read the textbook—Boorstein and Kelly—as a source of historical information. Interpreting it, or approaching it as a series of interpretations appeared to be separated from the process of using it for information. Reese put it this way:

> I hope that they are using [the textbook] as a source of information not necessarily interpretation. In other words, we don't have a situation where they ask me, "Was the Constitution a useful document? " and I say, "Well go ask Boorstein and see what he says." But rather it's, "Well how many states ratified it in a particular year? Go check in the book and see." The reason they [go] to the book as an authoritative source is because I give [tests]...and it's based on the reading of the textbook. In fact, I usually give them prefabricated questions

[3] This division may have its roots in Logical Empiricism's fact/value distinction. If so, it bespeaks the older epistemology underwriting the tradition of archivism and the type of school history described here.

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> based exactly on the textbook because that's the purpose of that exercise—[basic] reading comprehension. The book becomes the authority because the questions are based on the book.

Reiterating the fact-interpretation distinction, she later noted,

> I hope that I'm emphasizing...my belief that history is interpretive, [but] that they are not seeing the textbook as a source of interpretation. Boorstein—any historian—has his own view of history but some textbooks are more biased.... I mean textbooks...should try to be more informational than interpretive....

Here she implies that the Boorstein text was to be used by students primarily as a source of "unbiased" information. Interpretation was a different act, one removed from using the textbook as an informational archive.

Later, she circled back to the issue again. However, she took a different tack, once again reinforcing her belief in history as largely an interpretive process:

> ...it's a difficult task to determine what exactly is factual information. When I think of factual information in history I am reduced to "What year did an event occur" and sometimes we know exactly when an event occurred other times we don't, like the Battle of Lexington. Probably my view of what's fact is a lot smaller than [my] students' [view].

While Reese appeared to resolve the issue pedagogically by dividing fact and interpretation and the textbook from other sources, it was less clear that she was necessarily comfortable with it intellectually. At once, she seemed to be stressing that she was content to focus students on the Boorstein and Kelly textbook as an archival account of American history; yet, she also appeared to conclude that little of what we know about history falls within the fact category (her example: the year a battle occurred, but little else). Nonetheless, her latter conclusion was offset by the sheer number of what she seemed to be calling "informational" assertions contained between the covers of the Boorstein and Kelly textbook.

At this juncture, a significant intersection occurred between her school history's embrace of the tradition of archivism on the one hand and elements of the her belief in the interpretive nature of history reinforced her by recent scholarship on the other. With their different assumptions and ontological anchors pressing at one another, Reese searched for a point of "balance" as she called it. How did "balance" at the confluence of these two different positions play out in her classroom?

The Distinction, the Classroom, and Assessing Learning

While attempting to hold information and interpretation distinct, Reese vacillated back and forth between them. On the one hand, she tried to stress the interpretive nature of history in class. Over the 8 weeks of observations, she frequently prefaced many of here assertions with "some historians think" or "a few historians believe that...." She told her students on several occasions that, "History is more than memorizing facts; it's drawing conclusions and trying to *figure out* causes." Students read from several different primary sources as they studied the rhetoric of the American Revolution era (e.g., Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson). Point of view and political commitment were noted as significant in this emerging rhetoric. At the end of the unit, students conducted a debate in which they took either a Federalist or an AntiFederalist position on constitutional interpretation, mustered evidence, and tried to convince each other that their position had greater warrant. Students also were asked to construct an essay in which they sifted the "evidence" presented in the textbook and in class to assess the weaknesses and strengths of the Articles of Confederation.

However, on the other hand, these ninth graders were never asked explicitly to evaluate textbook claims or any other of many historical assertions put forward. As a result, no one asked where Boorstein and Kelly (or other historians) obtained their evidence, what political preferences underwrote these authors' convictions, what their frame of reference had been, or how one determines the difference between historical facts and interpretations. Rather they were asked to accept the textbook account as the uncontested "informational content" upon which they would be tested. The school district objectives outlined the specifics of this content. Around test and quiz time, the division separating the new history from this school's history was decisively settled in favor of the tradition of archivism.

Prior to the final unit test, Reese required students to develop review lists. These lists were to contain key names, terms, and events drawn from the textbook. The emerging lists were rather long. Reese told her students:

> The reason I have you do the lists is because it's part of what you need to know for a test—content you need to learn—the factual part is necessary. You are bringing things into short-term memory. Beyond that, we think about significance, drawing comparisons. These are thinking skills. Use your objectives to study. Your notes tell you what I think is important.

Here again we see this division between content or fact and interpretation. Reese's phrase "Beyond that..." is significant. For her, a floor of historical facts existed and, if the length of the review lists were any indication, the floor was littered with these facts. "Beyond that..."—that is, the facts—students got into the "interpretive range," which is what the essay was to entail. The test itself was weighted in favor of fact acquisition: 35 multiple-choice items, measuring recall at 70% of the test's value and 30 points for the sole essay question. Students did not ask about why the test was configured this way nor did they request more (or fewer) "interpretive-type" essay questions.

In one sense, the students were asked to take of the role of an historian in analyzing the Articles of Confederation, but in another, they were never privy to the related tasks of learning how to sift through primary evidence, evaluate its merits, and assess their own convictions relative to questions of interpretation and judging significance. Rather than conclude that the very things often called historical facts may well be shot through with interpretive judgments and prior commitments as the new history contends, Reese, in the context of her role as teacher in this school district, chose a much larger role for factual content and downplayed interpretive judgment.

Discussion

Reese's fact-interpretation balancing act and her reading of the school district's history objectives considered against the backdrop of her disciplinary commitments can be understood in a variety of ways. One way I entertain here explores how Reese navigated the fine line separating two different discourse communities, one of school history and the other of the new disciplinary history. She had intellectual, theoretical, and epistemological roots in both; yet the two communities upheld different definitions of the idea of history. The talk and practices of these communities seemed frequently in potential conflict. However, Reese was facile with both languages and was able to shift across them with some ease. This was evident in the interviews and to a degree in the classroom.

Stanley Fish (1980) has argued that discourse communities develop authority by virtue of agreement among practicing members about how concepts, terms, frameworks, and language in general will be employed. While always in some state of change or flux, often at the borders of communal activities, community members—say for example, teachers of school history—subscribe to

a number of intersubjectively shared definitions, epistemological givens, and ontological underpinnings. If one is to be a fully participating member in that community, it is important that the person accept a substantive set of these shared understandings as authoritative.

In her role as a high school history teacher, Reese was compelled then by the practices of her school district community to accept at some level the view of history as archive. To continue as a high school history teacher in this school district at least, she needed to reflect this position in her teaching practices. As a result, she needed to "bracket" out the discourse that had come to demarcate her role and identity as an historian of the new history. To the extent that she viewed herself primarily in her role as a high school history teacher, the symbolic power and authority of that school community discourse held greater sway in her practice. Here is how she put it:

> I think it's my professional responsibility, if I take a job to teach in a school system, to teach the curriculum that the school provides. Now I consider that I have a little bit of leeway there in how I do it and even to some extent what content I use, what content I emphasize. But on a more practical level, we give departmental exams for example, and if I go off and teach whatever I want in American History and then my students take an exam that's made within the department, I don't think that's fair to them.

It is possible that if I had studied Reese in her role as a practicing historian, in the context of her work at the university or on research missions as she collected data for her dissertation for example, I might have heard a very different overall kind of discourse, one influenced more exclusively by her new history perspective. Observing her as I did in the context of her experience as a teacher of school history to ninth graders necessitated a shift in her role, her discourse, and her practice. She adapted her discourse—as we all attempt to do—to fit the practice of the community she found herself in. This adaptation was pivotal in her efforts to resolve the tension between different community discourses.

However, as the interviews and glimpses of the classroom suggest, a definitive "bracketing" of discourse between the two views of history was never entirely complete. Reese tried to integrate them where she thought it was possible. As a result, even in her classroom, the discourse was beginning to shift, not at the center but at the margins. Perhaps this was a sign of important alterations in her practice. But, to the extent that the nature and range of discourse authority influences community

practice, Reese's task of changing her teaching will remain difficult unless—at a minimum—she is able to obtain shifts in the view of history supporting her school district's curriculum.

Conclusion

Reese's case is intriguing, especially set within the context of recent reform efforts that call for teachers in general to know more about the disciplinary perspectives that underpin the school subjects they teach (e.g., Holmes Group, 1986), for history teachers in particular to know more about recent developments in historiography (e.g., Seixas, 1994), and for teaching practice to be focused around a different set of standards than they have been in the past (e.g., National Center for History in the Schools, 1994). Here we have an historian high school teacher, deeply knowledgeable about her field and considerably influenced by the new history, who has some difficulty bringing this recent disciplinary discourse to bear on her classroom when faced by school objectives and assessment strategies rooted in a different tradition of historical scholarship.

The school contexts within which these history reforms are embedded can be characterized by deeply entrenched views about how to define history and a long past that supports such views. Change in how history is taught, especially if it is to be understood through the some of the filters of the new history standards, apparently will require simultaneous work on at least three fronts: professional development opportunities for current history teachers, rethinking the architecture and design of the history curriculum including how learning is assessed, and changes in the preparation of prospective history teachers. This is a most challenging agenda, one that likely will take a number of years to complete and will confront rather formidable barricades if the tradition of archivism remains an entrenched aspect of "real school." (see Metz, 1990 and Tyack & Tobin, 1994).

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Appendix

School District Objectives

The American Revolution

A. Analyze the Causes of the American Revolution

- Match the colonial problems faced by the British government from 1763 to 1765 with their propos solutions.
- Explain colonial responses to changes in British colonial practices from 1763 to 1765.
- Illustrate cause and effect relationships between British and American actions that culminated in the Declaration of Independence.
- Explain four purposes of the Declaration of Independence

B. Describe how the colonists achieved independence

- Explain the division among the colonists with respect to the question of independence.
- Compare the strengths and weaknesses of the Americans and British in the Revolutionary War.
- Identify the significance of the major battles of the Revolutionary War.
- List the terms of the treaty that ended the American Revolution.
- Describe the effects the American Revolution had on selected groups in the colonies.

The New Nation, 1781-1800

A. Assess the effectiveness of government under the Articles of Confederation

- Describe the historical basis for the Articles of Confederation.
- Identify the powers of state and federal government under the Articles of Confederation.
- Analyze the successes and failures of the Confederation government.

B. Analyze the purposes of the Constitution and the problems associated with its creatior

- Identify reasons for calling the Philadelphia convention.
- Match the disputed issues at the convention with the compromises that resulted.
- Describe the powers of the state and federal government under the Constitution.
- Contrast the arguments used by the Federalists and Anti-Federalists over ratification of the Constitution.
- Relate the Bill of Rights to grievances expressed in the Declaration of Independence.

C. Analyze the significant developments in government and society in the young republic

- Describe the steps taken by the executive and legislative branches to establish the power of the new government.
- Outline Hamilton's plan for solving the economic problems of the new nation.
- Explain how the new nation handled its foreign relations with Britain, France, and Spain.
- Describe how opposition to Federalist domestic and foreign policies led to the formation of a new political party.
- Compare and contrast the life experiences of the Americans in the northern states during the first decade of the republic.
- Describe the interaction of settlers and Indians on the western frontier during the early republic.